

POLITICAL DISCUSSION ON FACEBOOK:  
AN ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL GOALS AND DISAGREEMENT

By

Michael W. Kearney

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Chairperson Dr. Mary Banwart

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Dr. Jeffrey Hall

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Dr. Scott Harris

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The Thesis Committee for Michael W. Kearney  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Dr. Mary Banwart

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the processes that motivate, constrain, and shape political conversations on Facebook. Through an analysis of the Goals-Plans-Action model and the Political Interpersonal Communication index, this study finds that Facebook political conversations are primarily motivated by cognitive engagement and primarily constrained by personal standards regarding the appropriateness of discussing politics on Facebook. These conversations are further shaped by desires to create positive impressions. This study also examines the effects of disagreement on Facebook political conversations. Findings indicate that perceived disagreement does influence political activity on Facebook, though this relationship varies according to individual levels of tolerance for disagreement, political information efficacy, and political extremism. Overall, this study contributes to political disagreement scholarship and demonstrates the unique contributions of both interpersonal and political communication theory in the area of interpersonal political communication.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Technology continues to blur the lines between mass media and interpersonal channels of communication, allowing individuals to effortlessly chat with one another about political issues without geographical constraints. In today's increasingly digitalized age, individuals consume information from emerging online sources, while political campaigns scour databases to pinpoint consumer patterns in order to design messages that target smaller and smaller audiences (Issenberg, 2012). As a consequence, evidence of online social media's influence on politics continues to accumulate. A recent Pew survey found that two-thirds of young Americans engaged in social network-related political activities in the previous year (Smith, 2013). Roughly 60% of American adults now use online social networking sites, and nearly 40% of adults have used social media sites for political activities like posting comments or sharing links about politics (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, & Verba, 2012). Much of this activity occurred on Facebook, the most popular social media site in the United States with 167 million active users (Fottrell, 2013). It comes as little surprise, then, that interpersonal channels of communication on Facebook have influenced America's political landscape (Bond et al., 2012).

Taken together, these findings call into question many of the mass media assumptions found in political communication scholarship. Scholars have begun unearthing the effects of online interpersonal political communication, though precise understandings of the interplay between interpersonal and political communication scholarship remains illusive (Chaffee, 2001). With this in mind, the present study will analyze a cross-sectional survey in order to contribute to political communication scholarship in two ways. First, this study seeks to examine the role of interpersonal influences in online political discussion. Through Dillard's (1990) Goals-Plans-Action model, this study will analyze the motivations and constraints within online political

discussion and draw comparisons between interpersonal influence goals and dimensions of a political communication construct designed to reflect the interpersonal processes involved in political conversations. Second, this study seeks to extend political discussion research by examining the ways in which online discussion networks influence online behaviors. In particular, this study will examine how exposure to conflicting viewpoints influences Facebook political conversations. This study ultimately aims to contribute to political communication scholarship by providing a more accurate understanding of the interpersonal processes that occur in online channels of communication.

## **Chapter Two: Review of Literature**

### **Political Discussion**

Political discussion broadly refers to communication between individuals about public affairs. The precise meaning of the term, however, tends to fluctuate. Scheufele (1999) argued that political discussion includes both political conversation, which involves informal social interactions, and political talk, which is the more formal exchange of arguments. For the purpose of this study, political discussion will be defined as political conversation, or the interpersonal interactions about topics related to politics that occurs in more informal settings (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). Although this definition of political discussion does not necessarily resolve the ambiguity surrounding the term, research has nevertheless revealed several characteristics of political discussion. This research typically focuses on three areas: (1) the effects of political discussion on democratic outcomes, (2) the likelihood of political discussion, especially in specific contexts, and (3) the degree to which political discussion includes disagreement (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011).

### **Democratic Outcomes**

The first area of focus for political discussion research examines democratic outcomes. Studies have found that political discussion positively relates with political knowledge (Eveland & Hutchens, 2009; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Holbert, Benoit, Hansen, & Wen, 2002; Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011; Valenzuela, Kim, & Gil de Zuniga, 2011) and political participation (Jung et al., 2011; Mutz, 2002b; Tian, 2011; Zhang, Johnson, & Bichard, 2010). When examined as an intermediary influence of democratic outcomes, several studies have found that political media use and political interest predict political discussion (Moy & Gastil, 2006; Scheufele, 2002; Tian, 2011). However, studies in this area tend to operationalize political

discussion with one-dimensional measurements of frequency (e.g., Eveland & Hutchens, 2009; Holbert et al., 2002; Tian, 2011). Thus, while this research continues to reveal the relationships between political discussion and normatively desirable democratic outcomes, it rarely describes the ways in which political discussion actually occurs.

### **Likelihood of Online Political Discussion**

The second area of focus in political discussion research examines the likelihood of political discussion. This research contributes to understandings of where and how political discussion actually occurs by exploring specific contexts. While research in this area has generally assumed face-to-face contexts, scholars have recently explored political discussion in computer-mediated communication (CMC) contexts (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005). Computer-mediated communication differs from previous research in this area because CMC restricts important face-to-face communicative behaviors (Walther, Van Der Heide, Tong, Carr, & Atkin, 2010). For example, CMC limits nonverbal cues, causing individuals to manage interpersonal relational goals with more language-based strategies (Walther, 2007; Walther et al., 2010). This emphasis on language thus demonstrates the potential for unique political communicative patterns in CMC contexts.

An extension of the research exploring online, or CMC, political discussion examines whether it produces similar outcomes when compared to offline, or face-to-face, discussion. Studies have found significant relationships between both online and offline political communication and offline political participation (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, & Dunsmore, 2005). These findings suggest that online political discussion can produce similar outcomes to offline discussion, but again, it does not describe the ways in which political discussion actually occurs in CMC.



More recently, scholars have sought to compare political discussion in political and nonpolitical CMC contexts. In this line of inquiry political contexts refer to politically oriented platforms such as political blogs and discussion forums, whereas nonpolitical contexts refer to socially oriented media platforms. Political contexts tend to have greater levels of political discussion frequency, while nonpolitical contexts tend to produce more ideologically diverse environments, especially for young voters (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Freezell, 2011; Kim, 2011). This may seem obvious given that politically oriented sites naturally attract more political interested people. However, the emergence of more organic forms of political discussion between diverse individuals in nonpolitically oriented sites should not be overlooked.

Nonpolitical online contexts typically include social networking sites (SNSs), which are online platforms that enable individuals to connect and communicate with online and offline acquaintances. With the growth of CMC, individuals spend more and more time discussing politics on SNSs (Kim, 2011). And, on the surface, SNSs appear to be convenient vehicles for everyday discussion between individuals regardless of geographical distance. However, for political discussion, not all SNSs are created equal. On the one hand, when several SNSs such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube were combined to represent online political discussion, Zhang et al. (2010) found that only face-to-face political discussion positively related with political participation. On the other hand, research focused more narrowly on Facebook has found that online political discussion produced a meaningful influence on political activities such as voting (Bond et al., 2012). These findings therefore suggest that political discussion operates differently depending on the SNS.

Thus, the present study seeks to contribute to political discussion research by examining a particular SNS, Facebook. Originally created for college students, Facebook has expanded to

become America's most popular SNS (Fottrell, 2013), connecting millions of users with family members, friends, and acquaintances. As an interactive SNS, Facebook offers many interpersonal features that facilitate the sharing of information including updating profiles, posting and responding to comments, chatting, and liking posts. The growing popularity of Facebook has drawn attention from CMC scholars who have examined concepts such as impression management (Rosenberg & Edberg, 2011; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008), social capital (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), and CMC apprehension (Hunt, Atkin, & Krishnan, 2012), though this research has only recently begun to scratch the surface of interpersonal communication concepts such as influence goals (Dillard, 2004). Further research is therefore needed to more thoroughly examine the implications of political discussion on Facebook.

Indeed, previous studies support this decision to focus on Facebook in communication research and specifically political communication research. Compared to other SNSs, Facebook appears to more accurately reflect two important elements of face-to-face communication. First, Facebook promotes higher levels of identity salience than other SNSs. Halpern and Gibbs (2013) argued that as levels of anonymity in online settings increase, individual behavior becomes more socially deregulated in ways that diverge from face-to-face communication patterns. Since Facebook connects many users together with easily accessible profile information, it creates higher levels of identity salience than other online media such as YouTube and anonymous message boards (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). As a result, political discussion on Facebook tends to be more active and sociable (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Second, Facebook connects more offline friendships that tend to facilitate political mobilization (Bond et al., 2012), especially when compared to YouTube and SNSs that maintain higher levels of anonymity (Halpern & Gibbs,

2013). Thus, while computer-mediated political communication might ultimately differ in some ways from face-to-face communication (McLeod & Shah, 2009), the potential for online political discussion to influence offline behaviors may still exist on Facebook.

Granted, scholars have recently examined political discussion on Facebook, though they have mostly focused on the effects of political discussion on Facebook (e.g., Warner, McGowen, & Hawthorne, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Many of these studies have measured political discussion, or Facebook political participation, as a one-dimensional index of activities on Facebook such as posting comments and sharing news stories (e.g., Warner et al., 2012; Vissers & Stolle, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011). In order to draw comparisons with these studies, this study will employ a similar index of political activity to capture Facebook political participation. However, unlike previous research that examined the outcomes of Facebook political participation, this study will analyze Facebook political participation as an outcome of interpersonal processes.

### **Political Disagreement**

The third area of focus for political discussion research examines the degree to which individuals experience disagreement. Deliberative democratic theory has influenced much of this research (Mutz, 2008), as theorists have described the ideal forms of political discussion according to the deliberative model of democracy. Gutmann and Thompson (2003), for example, defined deliberation as the process of discussion and critical thinking between and among citizens regarding public decisions. Definitions such as these have inspired empirical research as notable theorists such as Habermas (2006) have encouraged the empirical examination of deliberative principles. Accordingly, the ideal, abstract concept of deliberation has become a referent point for political discussion research today.

The problem for many social scientists, however, has been that their attempts to examine normative theories of deliberation have not captured the ideal conditions on which they depend (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Mutz, 2008). For instance, deliberative theory may dictate that political discussion ought to exist in formal and public settings between diverse participants who engage in political disagreement in order to pursue rationale decisions. Of course, such a set of characteristics, however desirable, rarely reflects everyday occurrences of political discussion (Conover et al., 2002). Mutz (2008) therefore argued that empirical research should instead examine middle-range theories by replacing the vague concepts with more concrete descriptions of actually existing relationships in order to produce piecemeal contributions to grander deliberative frameworks.

Recent research has attempted to navigate this middle ground by examining disagreement in political conversations. Political disagreement broadly refers to the exposure to conflicting viewpoints during political conversations (Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013). This research tends to examine the likelihood and effects of political disagreement. However, the diversity in normative democratic theory literature has resulted in a proliferation of definitions regarding political disagreement. For these reasons, this study will evaluate competing definitions of political disagreement as they relate to the context of Facebook political discussion.

### **Goals-Plans-Action**

In order to more fully explore the connection between online political discussion and interpersonal processes, the present study will analyze online political discussion through a Goals-Plans-Action (GPA) model. In order to apply elements of the model, however, it is first necessary to unearth a key GPA assumption that lies within interpersonal influence attempts. The assumption being that communication is inherently purposive. Individuals select, structure, and

direct symbols so that every utterance serves a purpose whether it is to just pass time or to express a particular emotion (Kellermann, 1992). In the context of interpersonal communication, conversation goals not only motivate individuals, they shape and direct the act of communication itself (Kellermann, 1992). Thus, to study interpersonal influence is to study the ability for individuals to achieve and maintain goals within interactions.

With this in mind, Dillard (1990) developed the Goals-Plans-Action (GPA) model to help explain the purposive communicative processes within interpersonal influence attempts.

According to the GPA model, interpersonal interactions fit into a three-step sequence. First, individuals desire instrumental goals. Dillard (1990) defined *goals* as “future states of affairs which an individual is committed to achieving or maintaining” (p. 43). Second, individuals develop plans to achieve and maintain goals. *Plans* are cognitive representations of procedures directed toward a goal (Berger, 1997). Third, individuals act to achieve and maintain a goal. *Action* refers to the enactment of behaviors designed to realize a goal (Dillard, 2008). In short, according to GPA, interpersonal influence occurs through a desire, a method, and a process.

That communication is purposive, however, does not suggest that individuals maintain a conscious awareness of goals. Communication tends to occur automatically, meaning strategies are learned and tacitly used (Kellermann, 1992). The GPA model therefore assumes that individuals make choices with varying degrees of awareness when attempting to influence others (Dillard, 2008). This does not mean that individuals maintain awareness during conversations, but that goals are consciously accessible. That is, individuals can recall goals even without awareness during interactions (Dillard, 2004). In this way, the GPA model reflects the processes that occur with varying degrees of conscious awareness (Dillard, 2004). And, since GPA

retroactively accounts for these decisions, it serves as a valuable heuristic for interpersonal influence interactions.

### **Primary Goals**

The GPA model includes primary and secondary goals. Primary goals describe an individual's desire to induce change in another person (Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989). Primary goals frame interactions and, consequently, motivate plans and actions (Dillard et al., 1989; Schrader & Dillard, 1998). The GPA model considers these goals "primary" because they define situations of interpersonal influence (Dillard et al., 1989). Primary goals provide the initial push that triggers a series of considerations that include secondary goals (Dillard, 2004; Dillard et al., 1989). In the context this study, primary goals are the influence goals that draw individuals toward political conversations on Facebook.

### **Secondary Goals**

Secondary goals describe general motivations that shape and constrain individuals (Dillard et al., 1989). While primary goals motivate, secondary goals typically constrain interactions. That does not suggest, however, that primary goals are more important. Rather, influence goals primarily motivate and frame interactions, whereas secondary goals describe and constrain interactions (Wilson, 2007). Within interpersonal influence interactions, individuals attempt to balance and achieve multiple goals simultaneously (Dillard, 2004). In this sense, secondary goals shape and constrain behaviors that would otherwise mirror the instrumental purpose of interactions (Dillard et al., 1989). For example, imagine an individual, Susan, who is confronted with a friend, John, expressing a conflicting viewpoint on the definition of marriage. The GPA model would predict Susan to have, with varying degrees, an influence goal of persuading John to change his view. However, if Susan also strongly believes that pursuing her

influence goal might ruin her friendship, then her secondary goal—preserving her relationship with John—might overwhelm her influence goal and, consequently, constrain her action. In this example, the influence goal describes the situation, while the secondary goal ultimately constrains the interpersonal influence behavior.

Secondary goals that shape and constrain interactions include identity goals, interaction goals, relational resource goals, personal resource goals, and affect management (originally labeled “arousal management”) goals as initially developed by Dillard et al. (1989). *Identity goals* describe the desires relating to an individual’s self-concept, which operate according to internal standards or a personal conduct derived from an individual’s beliefs and preferences (Dillard et al., 1989). *Personal resource goals* describe the desire to maintain tangible and intangible assets (Dillard et al., 1989). *Affect management goals* assume that individuals want to maintain a preferred state of arousal (Dillard et al., 1989). Affect management goals therefore describe the desire to feel comfortable in an interpersonal influence attempt (Dillard et al., 1989). *Interaction goals* relate to social appropriateness and describe the desire to produce relevant and coherent messages while also managing impressions (Dillard et al., 1989). *Relational resource goals* are the personal rewards, emotional support, and other gratifications that result from the interactions (Clark & Delia, 1979). These goals thus attempt to measure the motivations that relate to the interaction itself.

In addition to these secondary goals, the influence goal also functions as a secondary goal during interpersonal interactions. The initial push from the influence goal frames the interaction, but it does not, in and of itself, explain influence behaviors. However, when the influence goal overwhelms constraints, it provides substance to the interaction. Since the meaning of an interaction is provided by secondary goals, the influence goal may temporarily function like a

secondary goal (Dillard et al., 1989). In other words, the influence goal triggers the interaction and functions as a motivator for influence behaviors. This study will therefore measure the influence goal alongside secondary goals in the context of political discussion on Facebook.

### **Interpersonal Goals and Political Discussion**

To better understand the motivations and constraints of online political discussion, this study applies the GPA model to political interactions on Facebook. Examining the motivators and constraints of online political discussion is necessary because, in addition to general communication differences, CMC produces messages that are immediately accessible to larger audiences that in turn influence interpersonal communication processes (McLeod & Shah, 2009). Moreover, the accessibility, speed, and graphical capacities of CMC introduce unique ways to produce messages that open new pathways for communication. The use of text formats and images, for example, has been found to vary as different interpersonal goals rise in importance within interpersonal interactions (Wilson & Zygurs, 2001). Based on these findings, Dillard (2004) theorized that some CMC contexts would encourage individuals to place greater value on instrumental goals as they focus more on content. However, while scholars have noted that particular situations can influence the force of particular goals (Schrader & Dillard, 1998), research has rarely explored the GPA model in CMC generally (Dillard, 2004) and the role of motivators and constrainters of political discussion specifically (Eveland, Morey, & Hutchens, 2011). Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to interpersonal influence research in the area of online political discussion.

Since the GPA approach to interpersonal influence assumes that communication occurs purposively, however, the primary or influence goal must be defined in the context of the Facebook political participation. In this case, the influence goal describes the persuasive goal



that takes place during political interactions on Facebook. And, while some individuals in face-to-face political conversations may attempt to ultimately change a particular person's political views, this study assumes that individuals have less ambitious goals when posting on Facebook. Given the increased size and the level of uncertainty in audiences within political interactions on Facebook, individuals would likely desire a more modest persuasive goal. Thus, the influence goal will be defined as getting Facebook friends to consider one's own political point of view. According the GPA model, then, the influence goal should predict Facebook political participation.

H1a: Individuals with strong influence goals will be more likely to participate in political activity on Facebook.

The desire to influence Facebook friends will likely be constrained by the identity, relational resource, and personal resource goals. Since the identity goal describes an individual's own personal conduct in a situation, the identity goal will be defined as internal standards regarding the appropriateness of discussing politics on Facebook. Individuals with strong identity goals would therefore believe that their political views do not belong on Facebook. Individuals with strong relational and personal resource goals might also be constrained in similar ways during political conversations. That is, as individuals become more concerned about losing relational resources, they might also start to become increasingly concerned with retaliatory or negative reactions. In terms of political conversations, these concerns have some empirical support. Mutz (2002b) found that social accountability concerns often compelled individuals to align with one group of friends while they simultaneously battled competing desires to not place other social relationships at risk. In other words, individuals looking to maintain social relationships often find themselves in difficult situations. Either they upset their friends who

dislike displays of political activity, or they upset their friends who expect them to join in the political activities. The relational resource goal will therefore be defined as the desire to maintain friendships or the concern over harming friendships through political conversations on Facebook, and the personal resource goal will be defined as the perceived potential of interpersonal threats in the forms of verbal attacks, ridicule, or backlash. Since individuals balance both interpersonal and intrapersonal tensions during political conversations, Facebook political participation should decrease as the identity, relational resource, and personal resource goals increase.

H1b: Individuals with strong identity, relational resource, and personal resource goals will be less likely to participate in political activity on Facebook.

While these relationships appear somewhat obvious, the relationships between the interaction and affect management goals and Facebook political participation are less clear. Since the interaction goal refers to the relational process rather than relationships, it reflects the desire to create positive impressions during political discussions on Facebook. While it seems possible that individuals would want to create or maintain positive impressions during political interactions on Facebook, it also seems possible that individuals would be deterred from entering those conversations because they do not feel confident in their own political knowledge. This relationship between confidence in one's own political knowledge and online political participation also has some empirical support (Warner et al., 2012). Similar to the interaction goal, the affect management goal describes to the affective process during interactions. Affect management goal therefore reflects a desire to avoid feelings of discomfort or nervousness in Facebook political conversations. However, while individuals might typically experience discomfort or nervousness in offline political conversations, online interactions may shield individuals from these affective concerns. With these considerations in mind, this study will

explore the relationships between the interaction and affect management goals and Facebook political participation.

RQ1: Are individuals with strong interaction and affect management goals more or less likely to participate in political activities on Facebook?

### **Political Interpersonal Communication**

In order to further explore political discussion, which lies at the intersection of political and interpersonal communication scholarship, the GPA model will also be compared to a political communication construct. Political communication research in this area has typically emphasized the behavioral components of political discussion, asking individuals to self-report levels of frequency (Banwart, 2007b). While this literature helps explain how the attitudes and perceptions of others influence political discussion, it does not necessarily capture how internal attitudes and perceptions influence an individual's decision to enter political discussion. Thus, Banwart (2007b) developed the Political Interpersonal Communication (PIC) index in order to represent the dimensions involved in decisions to engage in political discussion. Banwart (2007b) found that cognitive engagement, perceived relevance, and perceived knowledge emerged as the primary dimensions of political interpersonal communication. Together, these dimensions can explain the likelihood of individuals to enter political discussions even when the opinions of others are unclear (Banwart, 2007b). The present study will therefore extend Banwart's (2007b) Political Interpersonal Communication index to predict Facebook political participation.

H2: Individuals with high cognitive engagement, perceived knowledge, and perceived relevance will be more likely to participate in political activity on Facebook.

The first dimension of the PIC index, cognitive engagement, refers to the cognitive processes involved in developing political opinions, including the affective orientations toward political discussion (Banwart, 2007b). Individuals with high cognitive engagement also demonstrate perceptions of understanding and enjoyment in political discussion (Banwart, 2007b). These elements reflect previous research that found political discussion related to political interest (Tian, 2001). Since individuals with high cognitive engagement tend to understand and appreciate political topics, their behaviors would likely mirror the instrumental values found in the influence goal.

The second dimension, perceived relevance, refers to degree to which an individual feels and understands the relationship between political issues and his or her life (Banwart, 2007b). An individual with higher levels of perceived relevance believes politics directly and personally influences his or her life (Banwart, 2007b). In a sense, perceived relevance may share common ground with the influence goal since both constructs reflect instrumental concerns. Banwart (2007b) suggested that one perspective on this dimension “could argue that if someone feels politics and political issues are personally relevant and if they understand the resulting influence in their life, then it is likely they will adopt the view that politics are instrumental” (2007, p. 23). Thus, as perceived relevance increases, so, too, should the influence goal.

H3a: Individuals with high cognitive engagement and individuals with high perceived relevance will have stronger influence goals in Facebook political conversations.

The third dimension of the PIC index, perceived knowledge, refers to the relationship between perceptions of political knowledge competence and political discussions (Banwart,

2007b). This dimension reflects the desire for individuals to feel sufficiently knowledgeable about politics before engaging in political discussion (Banwart, 2007b). Elements of perceived knowledge reflect another political communication construct that supported this connection between political information competence and political behaviors. Kaid, McKinney, and Tedesco (2007) found that Political Information Efficacy related to political participation. While this finding illustrates the importance of perceived knowledge, Banwart (2007b) argued that the perceived knowledge dimension ultimately differs from political information efficacy because it emphasizes interpersonal communication rather than political participation more broadly (voting). If individuals are concerned about feeling knowledgeable, then those perceptions might also reflect the impression management concerns represented in the interaction goal. Thus, as perceived knowledge increases, individuals should become increasingly concerned with managing impressions and interaction goals due to their perceptions of insufficient perceived knowledge.

H3b: Individuals with high perceived knowledge will have stronger interaction goals in Facebook political conversations.

RQ2: Do cognitive engagement, perceived relevance, and perceived knowledge predict the identity, personal resource, relationship resource, and affect management goals?

### **Political Disagreement**

Before describing what counts as disagreement on Facebook, it is necessary to first locate the point at which disagreement occurs. Research in this area tends to either examine disagreement that occurs *within* an individual's networks and disagreement that occurs *between* an individual and his or her network (Nir, 2005). The former approach, or network-level disagreement, describes the diversity of viewpoints found within a discussion network. However,

while network-level disagreement reflects the composition of a network, it does not take into consideration the ego's political viewpoints (Nir, 2005). This is problematic for the current study because an individual with a homogeneous discussion network would report very little disagreement even if that individual held very different views compared to his or her network. Fortunately, the second approach resolves this concern. In this approach, the homogeneity of a network would only register as disagreement if those views differed from the individual's views. Political disagreement will therefore be defined at the individual-level in order to analyze disagreement as it occurs between the individual and his or her network.

After locating the point of disagreement, it is also necessary to understand the competing descriptions of disagreement that have created some confusion in political disagreement research. On the one hand, after measuring disagreement by comparing the presidential vote choices of an individual with the vote choices in his or her network – what I will refer to as affiliative disagreement – Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn (2004) found that individuals regularly encounter political disagreement. On the other hand, after measuring disagreement by asking participants to report perceptions of conflicting viewpoints – what I will refer to as perceived disagreement – Mutz (2002a, 2002b) found that individuals rarely encounter political disagreement. While these approaches clearly differ, they both appear to capture forms of political disagreement.

To understand the implications of these approaches, it is important to further understand how these approaches differ. In a panel study that compared the two measurements, Klobstad et al. (2013) found that only perceived disagreement had a significant relationship with political discussion. Klobstad (2013) argued that while affiliative disagreement provides a broader scope that captured more disagreement, perceived disagreement captures the more intense

manifestations of disagreement that tended influence political discussion (Klofstad et al., 2013). Morey, Eveland, and Hutchens (2012) offered additional support for this distinction, arguing that perceived disagreements are more likely to influence discussion frequency, whereas political differences are more likely to influence ultimate decisions. Since the present study seeks to examine both the frequency and the effects of Facebook political discussion, political disagreement will be operationalized as perceived disagreement.

Previous research in this area has generally confirmed Mutz's (2002b) argument that individuals retreat from political activity as political disagreement increases. Studies found that political disagreement decreases political participation (Mutz, 2002b), political interest, and political discussion (Klofstad et al., 2013; Wojcieszak & Price, 2012). Research also found that political disagreement increases awareness of opposing viewpoint rationales and tolerance (Mutz, 2002a). However, many of these studies, like much of political discussion literature, have only examined face-to-face communication.

### **Online Political Disagreement**

Though scholars have only recently started to examine political disagreement in online contexts, research suggests that, contrary to the assumption that CMC creates political echo chambers, individuals actually experience more political disagreement in online settings (Brundidge, 2010). Nonpolitical contexts, in particular, generate more opportunities for political disagreement than politically oriented contexts (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). However, much like in face-to-face communication, online political discussion occurs less frequently as individuals encounter more political disagreement (Valenzuela et al., 2011). While these studies illustrate some patterns of online political discussion, very little research has examined the effects of political disagreement in specific online contexts.

Facebook is one such online context that has been featured in recent political messaging trends. In addition to its nonpolitical orientation, Facebook connects a variety of users in ways that may be conducive to political disagreements. For example, unlike many SNSs, Facebook appears to create more encouraging environments for political discussion because user profiles display personal information that tends to discourage inflammatory behaviors that may deter political conversations (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). This is not to suggest, however, that Facebook users seek out disagreement. Rather, much like offline political conversations, Facebook users still seek out likeminded discussion partners. However, inadvertent exposure to conflicting viewpoints occurs more often because individuals do not actively avoid political disagreement (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). Facebook also offers users a number of features that could theoretically facilitate political disagreement. The ability to share links and stories with social media “plug-ins,” for example, enables individuals to influence one another by communicating personal recommendations between friends (Mutz & Young, 2011). However, while these Facebook features appear intriguing for the purpose of political disagreement research, they also present obstacles in terms of measurement.

### **Measuring Facebook Political Disagreement**

Though recent research has broadly examined political disagreement in SNSs, little has been done to refine disagreement measurements originally created for face-to-face communication. Several studies have compared various online platforms using a single-item to measure overall perceptions of cross-cutting views (e.g., Kim, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). In another study, Mutz and Martin (2001) measured political disagreement by replacing face-to-face discussant names with mass media sources. While this approach makes sense because media sources provide fairly consistent, one-directional channels



of communication, it does not capture the interactive nature of SNSs. Given the lack of empirical refinement in this area of research, I propose an approach to measuring disagreement by first navigating the constraints common to several approaches in recent political disagreement research.

One consistent approach in the literature has been to measure political disagreement with name generators that ask participants to identify and answer questions about three to five discussant partners (Eveland, Hutchens, & Morey, 2013). While these name generators can offer more detailed information about political discussion networks, they can also underestimate political network size particularly for larger networks that include weaker ties (Eveland et al., 2013). Since close ties tend to be more like-minded (Mutz & Young, 2001), name generators may not capture the influential conversations involving weak-ties (Valenzuela et al., 2011) that occur on SNSs like Facebook, on which individuals tend to experience more disagreement (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Furthermore, because messages immediately reach larger audiences, individuals tend to alter their messages in online political interactions (McLeod & Shah, 2009), highlighting the importance of capturing larger proportions of networks in online contexts. Though the name generator approach has proven to be robust in offline contexts, these concerns raise doubts regarding its ability to accurately capture political disagreement in Facebook interactions.

With these concerns in mind, this study will represent political disagreement on Facebook using a general network measure. Also, to address the concerns expressed by Morey et al. (2012) regarding items that reflect both affiliative and perceived differences, Mutz's (2002b) cross-cutting exposure scale will be modified in order to better reflect perceived, individual-level disagreement on Facebook. These decisions also appear consistent with Klofstad et al.'s (2013)

recommendation that scholars select dimensions of disagreement according to their research questions. Thus, after accounting for these measurement concerns, this study will hypothesize that Facebook political participation will decrease as individuals perceive more disagreement.

H4: Individuals with high perceived disagreement will be less likely to participate in political activity on Facebook.

### **Avoidance of Political Disagreement**

Ultimately, a primary goal of the present study is to contribute to an understanding of how and when Facebook political disagreement influences Facebook political participation. The approach taken here differs from much of the previous research insofar as it examines the relationships between two different patterns of communication. In other words, rather than examining how political disagreement influences political behaviors or attitudes, this study examines how political disagreement influences communication. And, in order to analyze the effect of political disagreement on Facebook political communication, it is necessary to understand the ways in which individuals differ in their responses to disagreement.

Previous research suggests that these differences may manifest when individuals decide to avoid political conversations in their attempts to avoid disagreement. Experimental evidence suggests that individuals tend to avoid disagreement in interpersonal discussions (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012; Ulbig & Funk, 1999). This research has also been extended to political discussion. Morey et al. (2012) found that individuals anticipate political disagreement and then decide to avoid or engage political topics (Morey et al., 2012). The present study will therefore hypothesize that Facebook political participation will vary as individuals perceive disagreement and decide to avoid political conversations on Facebook.

H5: As perceived disagreement increased, individuals will increasingly attempt to avoid politics and, in turn, participate less often in political activity on Facebook.

### **Tolerance for Disagreement**

Individual differences might also emerge within these avoidance decisions. Most obviously, some individuals might be more sensitive to disagreement than others. Ulbig and Funk (1999) found that conflict-avoidant individuals are more likely to avoid political discussions because they tend to anticipate disagreement. This suggests that the reactions to disagreement differ according to the tolerance that individuals have for disagreement. McCroskey (1992) defined tolerance for disagreement as "the amount of disagreement an individual can tolerate before he or she perceives the existence of conflict in a relationship" (p. 125). Thus, disagreement describes the mere divergence of opinions whereas conflict describes the interpersonal tension that can result from disagreement (Teven, McCroskey, & Richmond 1998). This suggests that as the tolerance for disagreement fluctuates, so to does an individual's tendency to engage in conversations that contain disagreement (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; Teven et al., 1998). And, since tolerance for disagreement reflects a general disposition toward disagreement, it may help to explain how individuals react to political disagreement differently.

### **Political Information Efficacy**

Recent research has further explored individual differences concerning perceptions of political knowledge. These differences often manifest along gender lines. Women have reported lower levels of political knowledge in general (Eveland & Thomson, 2006). In presidential campaigns, men perceived themselves as informed while women refrained from overstating their political knowledge (Banwart, 2007a). These trends also emerge during political conversations with both men and women rating men as more knowledgeable than women discussants (Cassese

& Snyder, 2008). These gender differences thus suggest that perceptions of political knowledge may help to uncover the different reactions of individuals to political disagreement.

Political communication research has typically measured external political efficacy, or perceptions of institutional responsiveness, and internal political efficacy, or an individual's overall competence to participate in politics (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). However, these constructs do not necessarily reflect the ways in which political knowledge efficacy influences interpersonal interactions. For example, a recent study found that neither internal nor external political efficacy significantly relate to perceived disagreement (Klofstad et al., 2013). However, because these efficacy constructs do not capture the ways in which political knowledge influences efficacy and political participation, they may overlook important processes that shape political behavior (Kaid et al., 2007). For these reasons, it is necessary to examine individuals' perceptions of political knowledge rather than internal and external political efficacy.

Kaid et al. (2007) proposed Political Information Efficacy (PIE) in order to focus "solely on the voter's confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage the political process" (p. 1096). Consistent with previous political knowledge findings, studies have found that men tend to report higher levels of PIE than women (Banwart, 2007a; Tedesco, 2011). Research has also demonstrated that PIE is sensitive to political messages. Tedesco (2011) found that despite reported differences in PIE, both young men and young women experience similar gains in efficacy when exposed to online political messages (Tedesco, 2011). Moreover, PIE is particularly well suited for research on Facebook interactions because it reflects many of the concerns of young voters. Young voters tend to attribute political behaviors to their confidence in their political knowledge (Wells & Dudash, 2007). Young voters also acquire much of their political knowledge through political discussions and place considerable weight on these

conversations (Wells & Dudash, 2007). Given these findings, PIE may also help explain how individuals differ in their responses to political disagreement on Facebook.

### **Political Extremism**

Finally, reactions to disagreement may vary according to levels of political extremism. Previous research has found that homogenous media content (Warner, 2010) and presidential debates (Warner & McKinney, 2013) tend to increase political extremism. Political extremism has also been linked to perceived disagreement and political participation. Politically extreme individuals who perceived high disagreement are more likely to participate in political behaviors than their counterparts who perceived less disagreement (Wojcieszak, 2011). The present study will therefore also examine the ways in which politically extreme individuals react to perceived disagreement.

### **Conditional Indirect Effects**

This study's final goal is to examine both how and when Facebook political disagreement influences Facebook political participation by analyzing the conditional indirect effects of political disagreement on Facebook. Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007) defined a conditional indirect effect as "the magnitude of an indirect effect at a particular value of a moderator (or at particular values of more than one moderator)" (p. 186). Thus, this study will hypothesize that both the direct and indirect effects of Facebook political disagreement on Facebook political participation will vary as functions of tolerance for disagreement, political information efficacy, and political extremism.

H6: The effect of perceived disagreement on Facebook political participation through avoidance will vary as a function of (a) tolerance for disagreement, (b) political information efficacy, and (c) political extremism.

## Chapter Three: Methods

### Participants

An online survey was completed by 452 undergraduate students at a major Midwestern university. In accordance with Tabachnick and Fidell's (2007) recommendations, 11 respondents with missing data were removed due to item nonresponse rates in excess of 5%. Since the remaining respondents had fewer than three missing items, those values were replaced by the mean of the corresponding scale (Graham, Cumsille, & Elek-Fisk, 2003). Finally, respondents who had Mahalanobis distances greater than  $\chi^2(7) = 24.32$  ( $p < .001$ ) were removed (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), which yielded a final sample of 432 respondents.

The sample consisted of 251 (58.1%) female and 181 (41.9%) male respondents with active Facebook accounts. The mean age of the sample was 19.50 ( $SD = 1.43$ ) and the mode and media were both 19.00. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (83.3%) with less than 4% being African American (3.5%), multiracial (3.2%), Hispanic (2.8%), Asian American (1.9%), international students (1.6%), Native American (1.2%), and 2.5% reporting "other." There were slightly more Democrats ( $N = 160$ , 37.0%) than Republicans ( $N = 145$ , 33.6%) and 127 (29.4%) respondents identified as Independents.

### Measures

**Covariates.** Socio-economic status was measured on a 5-point scale ranging from lower class to upper class ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .82$ ). Respondents reported an average of 43.51 minutes ( $SD = 42.20$ ) per day on Facebook and 716.81 Facebook friends ( $SD = 443.23$ ). Political interest was measured with one item, "*How interested would you say you are in politics?*" Respondents reported on a 5-point scale ranging from *very uninterested* to *very interested* ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ).

**GPA Variables.** Secondary goals were measured with 21-items adapted from Dillard et al.'s (1989) goals scale, which contains subscales for the influence, identity, interaction, relational resource, personal resource, and affect management goals. Respondents rated their level of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Since Dillard et al. (1989) developed the scale to be flexible for a variety of contexts, items were modified to ask about political conversations on Facebook. For example, the item "*It was very important to me to convince this person to do what I wanted him or her to do,*" was changed to, "*It is very important to me to convince Facebook friends to consider my political views.*"

Exploratory factor analysis was performed on the 21 secondary goal items using a principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation. The analysis revealed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was acceptable (.86), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant,  $\chi^2 = 2928.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating the appropriateness of the factor analysis on these data. In order to decide the number of retained factors, a parallel analysis was conducted using 100 replications of random data in the Monte Carlo PCA for Parallel Analysis computer program (Watkins, 2000). After examining several methods, Hayton, Allen, and Scarpello (2004) recommended the use of parallel analysis as the primary method for factor retention decision in exploratory factor analysis. Factors were therefore retained if the observed eigenvalues exceeded the random eigenvalues from the parallel analysis. The fourth and fifth observed eigenvalues, 1.40 and 1.01 respectively, demonstrated the cutoff point when compared with the fourth and fifth random eigenvalues from the parallel analysis, 1.24 and 1.20 respectively. An examination of the scree plot further supported this decision to retain a 4-factor solution. As can be seen in Table 1, the final solution accounted for 53.83% of the variance and



consisted of 16 of the original 21 items that loaded with at least .60 on one factor and less than .40 on the remaining factors.

The first factor, the affect management goal, accounted for 23.04% of the variance (eigenvalue = 4.84) and included six items. This factor was characterized by respondents' concerns of having their feelings hurt if they engaged in Facebook political conversations. A mean index was computed by averaging the items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .97$ ). The second factor, the interaction goal, accounted for 17.00% of the variance (eigenvalue = 3.56) and included four items. This factor was characterized by respondents' awareness of how Facebook friends perceive their behaviors during political conversations. A mean index was computed by averaging the items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ). The third factor, the influence goal, accounted for 7.64% of the variance (eigenvalue = 1.60) and included three items. This factor was characterized by respondents' desires to have their political views considered by their Facebook friends. A mean index was computed by averaging the items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$ ). The fourth factor, the identity goal, accounted for 6.17% of the variance (eigenvalue = 1.30) and included three items. This factor was characterized by respondents' personal beliefs that their own political views do not belong on Facebook. A mean index was computed by averaging the means (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics for all study variables.

\*\*\*Table 1 About Here\*\*\*

**PIC variables.** Cognitive engagement, perceived relevance, and perceived knowledge were measured using Banwart's (2007b) 15-item Political Interpersonal Communication index. Items asked respondents to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Cognitive engagement included eight items such as, "*I stay up to date on current political topics and issues*" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). Perceived relevance consisted of

four items, three of which were reverse coded such as, “*I do not understand how politics and political issues relate to me*” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .70$ ). Perceived knowledge included three items such as, “*It is important that I obtain news about a political topic from several sources before I will talk about it with others*” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .71$ ).

**Facebook participation.** Facebook political participation was measured using a 13-item index of activities with several items adapted from Vitak et al. (2011) and Warner et al. (2012). Items asked respondents to report how often (0 = *never*, 1 = *once*, 2 = *a few times*, 3 = *often*) they had done each of the listed activities in the previous six months. Items included activities such as, “*‘Like’ a status or comment about politics,*” “*Post a status or comment about politics,*” and “*Share a link about politics.*”

In order to examine the factor structure of the Facebook political participation index, exploratory factor analysis via principal component analysis was conducted on the 13 items. Results revealed that the second factor eigenvalue of 1.12 did not exceed the eigenvalue of 1.22 produced from a parallel analysis using Monte Carlo PCA for Parallel Analysis (Watkins, 2000) with 100 replications. The scree plot further confirmed the findings of the parallel analysis, thus the index was deemed one-dimensional. This final one-dimensional solution accounted for 44.30% of the variance. Since the original items loaded with values greater than .40, all 13 items were retained (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Perceived Disagreement.** To measure perceived political disagreement on Facebook, respondents were asked to respond to three questions on a 7-point scale ranging from *always the same* to *always different* (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ). The three items were worded as follows: “*When it comes to political issues, do you tend to have the same or different opinions as your Facebook friends?*” “*When it comes to political figures, do you tend to have the same or different opinions*

as your Facebook friends?” and “During last year's election, did you tend to have the same or different opinions as your Facebook friends when it came to presidential candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney?”

**Avoidance.** To measure the intention to avoid political discussion on Facebook, respondents were asked to report their level of agreement with four items using a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .96$ ). These items included, “I try to avoid discussing political issues on Facebook,” “I try to avoid posting on threads where Facebook friends are discussing political issues,” “I try to avoid discussing political figures on Facebook,” and “I try to avoid posting on threads where Facebook friends are discussing political figures.”

**Tolerance for disagreement.** Tolerance for disagreement was measured using Teven et al.'s (1998) 15-item Revised Tolerance for Disagreement scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ). Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with items such as “I enjoy disagreeing with others” and “I enjoy talking to people with points of view different than mine” using a 5-point scale ranging from *strong disagree* to *strongly agree*.

**Political information efficacy.** Political efficacy was measured using Kaid et al.'s (2007) 4-item measurement of political information efficacy (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ). The PIE scale asked respondents to rate each item using a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*.

**Political extremism.** Political extremism was measured by asking respondents to rate their attitudes toward Democrats and Republicans using a feeling thermometer with 0 meaning very unfavorable or cold and 100 meaning very favorable or warm. Political extremism was

calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference of the two values for each respondent.

Descriptive statistics for all measures are presented in Table 2.

\*\*\*Table 2 Here\*\*\*

### **Statistical Procedures**

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS. For the first set of hypotheses, regression analyses were conducted to examine and compare the overall PIC and GPA models as predictors of Facebook political participation. Regression analysis was then performed in order to assess the PIC variables as predictors of secondary goals. For the second set of hypotheses, analyses were conducted in order to examine perceived disagreement. Linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between perceived disagreement and Facebook political participation. PROCESS, a path analytic approach described by Hayes (2013), was then used to assess the effects of perceived disagreement both directly and indirectly through avoidance on political participation. PROCESS was then used to assess the direct and indirect effects as functions of tolerance for disagreement, political information efficacy, and political extremism.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Interpersonal Constructs**

For the hypotheses that focused on the GPA and PIC variables, linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the overall models as predictors of Facebook political participation. Additional regression analyses were then conducted to examine the PIC variables as predictors of GPA variables. The same control variables—socio-economic status, age, sex, Facebook time, Facebook friends, and political party—were used throughout the analyses.

**Secondary goals.** Model 1 included the four secondary goals retained from the factor analysis: influence, identity, interaction, and affect management. As shown in Table 3, the overall model was significant, accounting for 21.6% of variance in predicting Facebook political participation. For the control variables, respondents who were older, spent more time on Facebook, and were Democrats reported more political activity on Facebook. Hypothesis 1 posited that (a) individuals with strong influence goals would be more likely to participate in political activity on Facebook and that (b) individuals with strong identity goals would be less likely to participate in political activity. Only Hypothesis 1b was supported. Results indicated that the influence goal was not a significant predictor of Facebook political participation, while the identity goal was a significant, negative predictor. Research Question 1 asked about the interaction and affect management goals. Results revealed that the interaction goal was a significant, positive predictor of Facebook political participation, while the affect management goal was not significant.

**PIC index.** Model 2 included the three PIC variables: cognitive engagement, perceived knowledge, and perceived relevance. Hypothesis 2 posited that individuals with high levels of cognitive engagement, perceived knowledge, and perceived relevance would be more likely to

participate in political activity on Facebook. As shown in Table 3, the overall model was significant, accounting for 34.9% of variance in predicting Facebook political participation. For the control variables, respondents who were older, spent more time on Facebook, and were Democrats reported more political activity on Facebook. For the PIC variables, cognitive engagement and perceived relevance were significant, positive predictors of political activity on Facebook. However, perceived knowledge was not significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was only partially supported.

\*\*\*Table 3 About Here\*\*\*

**Comparing Models.** In order to draw further comparisons between the overall PIC and GPA models as predictors of Facebook political participation, regression analyses were performed using procedures described by Henningsen, Valde, Russell, and Russell (2011). In the first regression, the GPA variables were entered into the model, followed by the PIC variables. In the second regression, the PIC variables were entered, followed by the GPA variables. Changes in  $R^2$  were then compared to determine the extent to which each model accounted for the variance in Facebook political participation. In both regressions, the control variables produced a significant  $R^2$  of .095,  $F(7, 424) = 6.36, p < .000$ .

In the first regression, the GPA variables contributed significantly to the prediction of political activity on Facebook with an  $R^2$  change of .121,  $F(4, 420) = 16.16, p < .001$ . In the following step, the PIC variables also contributed significantly with an  $R^2$  change of .178,  $F(3, 417) = 40.94, p < .001$ . In the second regression, the PIC variables contributed significantly to the overall model with an  $R^2$  change of .254,  $F(3, 421) = 54.76, p < .001$ . In the following step, the GPA variables also contributed significantly with an  $R^2$  change of .045,  $F(4, 417) =$

7.76,  $p < .001$ . These results suggest that each model significantly contributes to explaining unique variance in Facebook political participation not accounted for by the other model.

\*\*\*Table 4 About Here\*\*\*

Table 4 shows standardized regression coefficients for the variables when all entered into the regression equation. For the control variables, respondents who were older, spent more time on Facebook, and were Democrats reported more political activity on Facebook. For the GPA variables, only one secondary goal was significant. The identity goal was a significant, negative predictor of political activity on Facebook while the other goals were not significant. For the PIC variables, cognitive engagement and perceived relevance were positive, significant predictors of political activity on Facebook, though perceived knowledge was not significant.

**Predicting secondary goals.** In order to explore Research Question 2, which asked about the relationships between the PIC variables and secondary goals, regression analyses were performed with each of the secondary goals as criterion variables. The models, which are summarized in Table 5, performed well, accounting for 20.6% of variance in the influence goal, 17.7% of the variance in the identity goal, 16.3% of the variance in the interaction goal, and 9.0% of the variance in the affect management goal. For the control variables, Democrats and Republicans reported stronger influence goals. Respondents who were younger reported stronger identity goals. And, respondents who were female and respondents who were Republican reported stronger affect management goals.

Hypotheses 3a, which posited that the influence goal would be positively predicted by cognitive engagement and perceived relevance, was partially supported. Results revealed that for the influence goal, all three PIC variables were significant, though only cognitive engagement was positive predictor. Surprisingly, perceived relevance was a negative predictor of the

influence goal. Hypothesis 3b, which posited that the interaction goal would be positively predicted by perceived knowledge, was supported. Results revealed that the interaction goal was positively predicted by perceived knowledge and perceived relevance. The identity goal was negatively predicted by cognitive engagement and positively predicted by perceived knowledge. Finally, the affect management goal was negatively predicted by perceived knowledge.

\*\*\*Table 5 About Here\*\*\*

### **Political Disagreement Constructs**

To examine the second set of hypotheses, which proposed several relationships between perceived disagreement and Facebook political participation, three steps of statistical analyses were conducted. First, linear regression analysis was performed to examine the relationship between perceived disagreement and Facebook political participation. Next, PROCESS, a path analytic approach described by Hayes (2013), was used to examine the effects of perceived disagreement both directly and indirectly through avoidance on political participation. Finally, PROCESS was again utilized to examine both the direct and indirect effects as functions of tolerance for disagreement, political information efficacy, political extremism, and perceive disagreement. The same covariates—socio-economic status, age, sex, Facebook time, Facebook friends, political party, and political interest—were used throughout the analyses. Since a bootstrapping approach does not require the direct and indirect effects to be normally distributed, each PROCESS model used 10,000 bootstrapped bias corrected resamples.

**Disagreement.** Hypothesis 4 predicted that individuals with high perceived disagreement would be less likely to participate in political activity on Facebook. Regression analysis revealed that the overall model was significant, accounting for 25.4% of the variance,  $F(9, 422) = 15.96, p < .001$ . For the covariates, respondents who were older ( $B = .74, SE B = .21, p = .001$ ), spent



more time on Facebook ( $B = .03$ ,  $SE B = .01$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Democrats ( $B = 2.25$ ,  $SE B = .75$ ,  $p = .003$ ) and were more politically interested ( $B = 2.59$ ,  $SE B = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were more likely to participate in political activity on Facebook. However, Hypothesis 4 was not supported as perceived disagreement ( $B = .76$ ,  $SE B = .35$ ,  $p = .028$ ) positively predicted political activity on Facebook.

**Indirect effects.** Hypothesis 5 predicted that as perceived disagreement increased, individuals would increasingly try to avoid politics and, in turn, participate less often in political activity on Facebook. Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (model 4) was used in order to examine the effects of perceived disagreement both directly and indirectly through avoidance on Facebook political participation.

Regression coefficients for all of the variables in the avoidance and political participation models are summarized in Table 6. As can be seen in paths *a* and *b* in Figure 1, perceived disagreement positively predicted avoidance, and avoidance negatively predicted political participation. As illustrated in paths *c'* and *c* in Figure 1, perceived disagreement had a positive direct effect and negative indirect effect on political participation. The 95% BC bootstrap confidence intervals indicated that both the direct effect (.55, 1.81) and the indirect effect (-.77, -.10) were significant, supporting Hypothesis 5. Thus, these results revealed that avoidance not only mediated the relationship between perceived disagreement and political participation, avoidance also suppressed the relationship between disagreement and political participation.

\*\*\*Figure 1 About Here\*\*\*

\*\*\*Table 6 About Here\*\*\*

**Conditional effects.** Hypothesis 6 predicted that the direct and indirect effects of disagreement on Facebook political participation would vary as functions of (a) tolerance for

disagreement, (b) political information efficacy, and (c) political extremism. In order to test the conditional indirect effects of perceived disagreement, each moderator was mean-centered and entered into PROCESS model number 8, illustrated in figure 2. Separate models were run for each moderator variable. Values for each of the moderators were selected in each model at the mean and plus or minus one standard deviation (low, moderate, and high).

\*\*\*Figure 2 About Here\*\*\*

**Tolerance for disagreement.** Hypothesis 6a proposed that the direct and indirect effects of perceived disagreement on Facebook political participation would vary as individuals varied in their tolerance for disagreement. As can be seen in Table 7, although the direct relationship between perceived disagreement and participation remained significant, the direct effect became smaller as tolerance for disagreement increased. For the indirect effects, the effects of perceived disagreement through avoidance on participation became larger as tolerance for disagreement increased. In fact, at the low level of tolerance for disagreement, the indirect effect was not significant, which suggests that there is not a relationship between perceived disagreement and Facebook political participation for individuals with low tolerance for disagreement. Overall, Hypothesis 6a was supported as these results indicated that the effects of disagreement on political participation, both directly and indirectly, varied as a function of tolerance for disagreement.

\*\*\*Table 7 About Here\*\*\*

**Political information efficacy.** Hypothesis 6b proposed that the direct and indirect effects of perceived disagreement on Facebook political participation would vary as individuals varied in their political information efficacy. The findings for political information efficacy are summarized in Table 8. Results revealed that the direct effect of perceived disagreement on

political participation became smaller as political information efficacy increased. For the indirect effects, the effects of perceived disagreement through avoidance on political participation also became smaller as political information efficacy increased, so much so that the indirect effect was not significant at the high level of political information efficacy. Hypothesis 6b was supported as these results revealed that the effects of disagreement on political participation varied as a function of political information efficacy.

\*\*\*Table 8 About Here\*\*\*

**Political Extremism.** Hypothesis 6c posited that the direct and indirect effects of perceived disagreement would vary as individuals varied in political extremism. As can be seen in Table 9, results revealed that the direct effect of perceived disagreement became smaller as political extremism increased. For the indirect effects, the effects of perceived disagreement through avoidance also became smaller as political extremism increased. Much like the political information efficacy findings, the indirect effect was not significant at the high level of political extremism. Hypothesis 6c was supported as the results revealed that the effect of disagreement on political participation varied as a function of political extremism.

\*\*\*Table 9 About Here\*\*\*

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

This study sought to compare two interpersonal constructs and to examine the effects of political disagreement in order to examine why and how Facebook political participation occurs. First, through the Goals-Plans-Action model and the Political Interpersonal Communication index, this study analyzed the cognitive influences that shape and constrain political activity on Facebook. Second, this study analyzed the ways in which exposure to political disagreement relates to Facebook political participation. Ultimately, the results revealed many of the forces that motivate, constrain, and shape Facebook political discussion.

### **Goals-Plans-Action and Political Interpersonal Communication**

In terms of the GPA model, the interaction and identity goals contributed significantly to explaining variance in Facebook political participation. Individuals were motivated to participate in Facebook political activity due to strong interaction goals. Surprisingly, however, the influence goal did not predict Facebook political participation. These results suggest that while individuals might want to persuade their Facebook friends about certain political topics, they ultimately decide to engage in political conversations when they feel that their behaviors would create or maintain positive impressions. This is consistent with Rosenberg and Egbert's (2001) study that found Facebook behaviors tended to reflect relational and interaction goals and impression management strategies more than instrumental desires. This finding also appears to reflect Dillard et al.'s (1989) contention that the influence goal primarily reflects energy and effort in an influence process while the secondary goals reflect communication. This may also explain the prevalence of the interaction goal in Facebook political conversations. As Berger (1997) argues, "people who wish to achieve the goal of changing the opinion of another may feel it necessary to ingratiate themselves in their targets first" (p.21). Given these findings, future

research should further examine the relationships between secondary goals and efficiency in message production (Berger, 1997; Kellermann, 2004) in the context of online political discussions.

On the whole, however, these results indicated that individuals rarely engaged in Facebook political activity due to, in large part, the identity goal. This suggests that individuals tend to refrain from political activity because they view political conversations on Facebook as inappropriate. The prevalence of the identity goal and its relationship with Facebook political participation might be explained by research that suggests a relationship between political socialization and political discussion frequency (Hutchens & Eveland, 2009). In other words, individuals may formulate these personal standards of political discussion through early social experiences.

Several inferences may also be drawn concerning secondary goals from the exploratory factor analysis. Although this study adapted items from Dillard et al.'s (1989) scale that includes six secondary goals, the exploratory factor analysis retained only four factors. Items from the first omitted goal, the personal resource goal, appeared to collapse into one factor with affect management items. Though unexpected, this result makes sense in an online context because, unlike face-to-face interactions, the personal resources at stake on Facebook are not physical in nature. Instead, because individuals worry about getting their feelings hurt, they attempt to manage interactions in order to avoid discomfort or anxiety. The second omitted goal, the relational resource goal, included three items adapted from Dillard et al.'s (1989) secondary goal scale. One of these items loaded onto the influence goal, another item loaded onto the interaction goal, and the final item was excluded from the analysis. Thus, although the influence and interaction goals contained some relational elements, none of the

retained factors appeared to reflect the relational resource goal. These results suggest a need for future research to re-conceptualize what counts as a relational “resource” in online contexts such as Facebook. Rather than worrying about offline relationships, for example, Facebook users might be more concerned about online resources such as “likes,” “comments,” or “subscriptions.”

Factor analysis also revealed that the affect management goal only reflected negative affect characteristics. However, since individuals are not physically present in Facebook interactions, individuals likely feel less exposed and, consequently, less likely to experience discomfort or nervousness while engaging in political discussion on Facebook. This does not suggest, however, that individuals do not experience comfort or excitement as they anticipate or engage political conversations. Instead, previous research suggests that individuals do, in fact, feel comfortable and express their opinions when they believe that others will support them (Dalisay, Hmielowski, Kushin, & Yamamoto, 2012). Furthermore, individuals may also choose to engage in political conversations on Facebook when they anticipate a thrilling or exciting conversation experience.

Analysis of the Political Interpersonal Communication index provides some insights in the area of positive affect. In particular, the cognitive engagement dimension, which was found to be the largest predictor of Facebook political participation, captures an affective cognitive dimension that reflects an individual’s fascination with politics (Banwart, 2007b). Surprisingly, however, while perceived relevance also predicted Facebook political participation, perceived knowledge was not significant. These findings suggest that while individuals who are fascinated and who feel personally affected by politics are more likely to engage in political activity on Facebook, individuals are generally not concerned about feeling sufficiently knowledgeable

about politics. In other words, these findings suggest that individuals do not hold themselves accountable in terms of political knowledge during political conversations on Facebook.

On the whole, assessments of both the GPA and the PIC variables highlight the importance of giving careful consideration to the ways in which interpersonal communication occurs in online contexts. Analysis of the dimensions in both the GPA model and the PIC index further suggest that scholars should not hesitate to adapt face-to-face concepts and constructs in order to more accurately reflect the unique characteristics of online political discussion.

### **Comparing the GPA model and the PIC index**

Additional analyses were also performed in order to draw more direct comparisons between the GPA and PIC models. The models were first compared in terms of their unique contributions in accounting for the variance of Facebook political participation. Next, the GPA and PIC variables were all entered into a regression equation predicting Facebook political participation.

In terms of the overall models, results revealed that both the PIC index and the GPA models accounted for additional, unique variance in political participation. However, the PIC index appeared to be the superior model. When entered first, the PIC variables accounted for more than five times the amount of variance accounted for by the secondary goals. Even when were entered after the secondary goals, the PIC variables accounted for more of the variance in Facebook political participation. And, with all of the variables entered in the regression equation, both cognitive engagement and perceived relevance were significant predictors of Facebook political discussion while only one secondary goal, the identity goal, was significant. These findings revealed that cognitive engagement was the single largest predictor and again illustrated that the instrumental goal did not bear a significant relationship with Facebook political

participation. These results suggest that political activity on Facebook tends to reflect political fascinations and not desires to affect individuals' political views. In terms of political messaging more broadly, this suggests that political trends come and go on Facebook because they intrigue individuals and not necessarily because individuals desire real changes in political beliefs. Finally, these findings also suggest that cognitive engagement and perceived relevance likely trumped the interaction goal, which was found to be a significant predictor without the PIC variables entered.

Finally, regression analyses were conducted with the PIC variables entered as predictors for each secondary goal. It was hypothesized that individuals with high cognitive engagement and individuals with high perceived relevance would have stronger influence goals. However, while all three PIC variables were found to be significant, only cognitive engagement was a positive predictor of the influence goal. Surprisingly, individuals with high perceived relevance also reported weaker influence goals. This suggests that individuals who believe politics directly influences their lives do not tend to believe that Facebook is a place where they can actually affect political change. Results did support the hypothesized relationship for individuals with high cognitive engagement and strong influence goals, which makes sense because individuals who enjoy thinking about politics would also likely want to have their political views considered by friends. Results also revealed that individuals with high perceived knowledge were less likely to have stronger influence goals. While not expected, it makes sense that individuals would not seek out Facebook political conversations in order to persuade their friends about political issues when they are already concerned about the sufficiency of their own political knowledge.

It was also hypothesized that individuals with high perceived knowledge would also report stronger interaction goals. Results supported this hypothesis, which suggests that



individuals who are more concerned about having sufficient knowledge before entering political conversations are also more concerned with creating and maintain positive impressions during political conversations on Facebook. Results also revealed that individuals with high perceived relevance reported stronger interaction goals, which suggests that individuals who believe politics directly influences their lives also tend to be concerned with how they are perceived during political conversations on Facebook.

Analyses also examined how the PIC variables related to the identity and affect management goals. Results for the identity goal revealed that individuals with low cognitive engagement and high perceived knowledge reported stronger identity goals. It makes sense that individuals do not think their political views belong on Facebook when they dislike politics or when they are concerned about possessing enough political knowledge. For the affect management goal, individuals with high perceived knowledge also reported stronger affect management goals.

These analyses of PIC variables and secondary goals also raise some interesting question regarding perceived knowledge and Facebook political participation. Even though perceived knowledge was significantly related to the interaction and identity goals, earlier analysis revealed that perceived knowledge did not predict Facebook political participation while the interaction and identity goals did. Even more interesting, the standardized regression coefficients presented in Table 3 also indicate that the relationships with perceived knowledge and the identity and interaction goals were two of the largest relationships among all of the PIC and GPA variables. Thus, while perceived knowledge may not offer a direct explanation of communicative behavior in online political discussions, these results suggest that perceived knowledge does offer an

explanation of the interpersonal process that directly contribute to online political discussion behaviors.

Overall, these results illustrate the potential for unique contributions from the intersection of both interpersonal and political communication scholarship when seeking to further study and more deeply understand the complexities surrounding political discussion research. Based on these findings future research should continue exploring this overlap by examining the function of secondary goals in various political discussion models such as Eveland's (2004) discussion elaboration model or by examining the differences between online and offline political discussions. The application of interpersonal constructs in these areas should help to uncover the relational influences that political communication scholars might otherwise overlook. Regardless of the direction, however, research at the intersection of political and interpersonal communication should strive to reflect the rich literature bases in each of these areas.

### **Political Disagreement**

In terms of political disagreement, the initial analysis contradicted the hypothesized relationship between perceived disagreement and Facebook political discussion. Although previous research suggested that individuals would be more likely to retreat from political activity when they encountered more disagreement on Facebook, results revealed that individuals with high perceived disagreement actually reported more Facebook political participation. While previous research has regularly produced conflicting findings concerning disagreement and political participation (Klofstad, 2013; Nir, 2005), this result might reflect the nature of political communication on a socially oriented site such as Facebook. It could be, for instance, that individuals are more open to disagreement in socially oriented sites for the same reasons that they experience more political disagreement on sites that are not politically oriented (Wojcieszak

& Mutz, 2009). Individuals may therefore feel more relaxed in these settings, and consequently, more likely to chime in when they encounter interesting political disagreements.

While Facebook's social orientation is one possible explanation, another explanation may be that there is more to the relationship between perceived disagreement and political participation. To examine a more nuanced relationship, this study also examined the direct and indirect effects of perceived disagreement after accounting for the intention to avoid politics on Facebook. Results supported the hypothesis that perceived disagreement would effect Facebook political participation through avoidance. Results revealed that perceived disagreement had a positive direct effect and a negative indirect effect on Facebook political activity. Interestingly, avoidance thus functioned as both a mediator and a suppressor variable in the relationship between perceived disagreement and Facebook political participation. Unlike the findings presented for Hypothesis 5, which revealed a positive relationship between disagreement and political participation, the indirect effect appears consistent with Mutz's (2002b) argument that individuals retreat from political activity as they perceive more disagreement. The direct effect also suggests that when individuals actively decide not to retreat from political conversations they become more likely to enter into political conversations as perceived disagreement increases. In other words, Facebook users who perceive more disagreement also tend to avoid political conversations and, in turn, participate less often in Facebook political activity. The decision to avoid political topics on Facebook therefore suppresses the overall relationship between perceived disagreement and Facebook political participation.

Overall, these findings suggest a more complicated relationship between disagreement and participation than is commonly described in political discussion literature. Rather than attempting to resolve the debate about whether or not exposure to political disagreement

increases or decreases political participation, these findings suggest that researchers should expect and examine a more nuanced relationship. This suggestion is consistent with Klofstad's (2013) argument that contradictory findings in political disagreement literature are, in part, the result of measuring different manifestations of disagreement. The results presented here provide further explanation for this argument insofar as they reveal the possibility that individuals react to disagreement by altering their intentions to engage in political behaviors, which in turn produces lower levels of political participation. This also echoes Eveland and Morey's (2012) contention that researchers should consider disagreement measurements that target expressed or avoided disagreement rather than affiliative differences. And, as this study suggests, this consideration appears particularly important in online contexts where users may not be as aware of acquaintances' political affiliations. However, it should be noted, as this study demonstrates, that avoidance is distinct from both disagreement and political discussion.

These findings also bring into the fold questions concerning the potential spillover of online discussion into offline forms of political participation. Although Facebook political participation has been linked to voter mobilization (Bond et al., 2012) recent research has found little evidence that online political participation spurred broader forms of offline political participation (Vissers & Stolle, 2012). Given the present study's findings, however, future research should examine the relationships between perceived disagreement in online political discussions and offline political participation in order to further evaluate the ways in which disagreement influences political behaviors.

Finally, this study analyzed the direct and indirect effects of disagreement on political participation by examining three moderator variables: political information efficacy, political extremism, and tolerance for disagreement. A path-analytic approach was conducted in order to

assess the direct and indirect effects at the low, medium, and high levels of each of the moderators. For each of the first two moderators, results revealed that as political information efficacy and political extremism increased, the effects of perceived disagreement on Facebook political participation decreased. These findings make sense given that political information efficacy (Warner, et al. 2012) and political extremism (Wojcieszak, 2011) have been linked to higher levels of political participation. This is also consistent with Banwart's (2007b) argument that when individuals feel more confident with their political knowledge those perceptions become a buffer that shields them from interpersonal risk.

Similar results were found for the direct effects in terms of tolerance for disagreement. Results revealed that individuals with high tolerance for disagreement were less likely to be directly influenced and, surprisingly, more likely to be indirectly influenced by perceived disagreement. These results therefore suggest a seemingly counter-intuitive indirect relationship for individuals with high tolerance for disagreement. As one might expect, the direct effect suggests that individuals with high tolerance for disagreement are less affected by perceived disagreement. This finding is consistent with research that found disagreement had less of an effect on self-censorship for individuals with low willingness to self-censor (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005; Hayes, Uldall, & Glynn, 2010). However, contrary to what one might assume, the indirect effect suggests that individuals with high tolerance for disagreement are more affected by perceived disagreement through the intention to avoid politics on Facebook.

Ultimately, this finding might appear counter-intuitive due to the operationalization of the avoidance variable. Since the variable only measures the degree to which an individual tries to avoid political conversations, it does not capture those individuals who actively try to engage political conversations. If the intention to engage politics on Facebook had been measured, the

indirect effect of disagreement through engagement may have also increased for individuals with high tolerance for disagreement. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that when some individuals with high tolerance for disagreement decide to avoid political conversations on Facebook, they also tend to follow through more resolutely and consequently participate less often in Facebook political activity. These findings are also suggestive of a more limited contour than one might expect for the tolerance for disagreement construct. That is, while it makes sense that individuals with high tolerance for disagreement are predisposed against avoidance, these findings suggest that these individuals are also more likely to follow through when they do make avoidance decisions, even if they tend to make fewer of them.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted that the present study faced some limitations. First, the sample of university undergraduate students limits the generalizability of the findings. This is especially true in the case of young voters who tend to be less politically engaged than other segments of the population. On the other hand, because young voters lag behind, and because research has often overlooked the motivations and constraints of young voters, there is a need for research in this area (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). As young voters continue to encounter political conversations on SNSs like Facebook, research in this area will be fruitful in terms of political messaging and generating democratic participation.

Second, the present study was limited by its cross-sectional design. Although several models assumed causal relationships between variables, cross-sectional data prevents any real claims of causality, especially given a reliance on self-reports. However, while it must be acknowledged that these findings could be explained by reciprocal causation, numerous studies have nevertheless supported the causal directions claimed in the current study. Panel data has

consistently found that political disagreement influences political discussion (Quintelier, Stolle, & Harell, 2012; Wojcieszak & Price, 2012). Experimental data indicated that people tend to avoid interpersonal disagreement (Gerber et al., 2012). Furthermore, the hypotheses were also derived with theoretical support from interpersonal influence research (Dillard et al., 1989) and political information efficacy research (Kaid et al., 2007). Thus, while there is a need for future research to further explore these causal relationships, the findings presented here still offer suggestive evidence of the motivations and constraints of online political discussion.

Third, the present study employed one of a variety of approaches to measuring political discussion. In particular, many studies in the literature measure political discussion variables with name generators that allow participants to provide more detailed descriptions of three to five discussants. Of course, most of this research has also assumed political discussion occurs in face-to-face contexts. In online contexts, however, these approaches may not capture the brevity of online audiences and, consequently, underrepresent online discussion networks. For these reasons, general discussion network measures were chosen. Future research should examine these measurement differences in online contexts.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

This purpose of this study was to contribute to understandings of how and why political conversations occur on Facebook. The results presented here revealed that Facebook political conversations are primarily motivated by cognitive engagement and are primarily constrained by personal standards regarding the appropriateness of discussing politics on Facebook. These conversations are further shaped by various individual reactions to disagreeable political views within Facebook networks. Results revealed that while perceived disagreement effects Facebook political participation after accounting for avoidance decisions, individuals also differ in their reactions to disagreement and in their decisions to avoid political discussion.

This study provides a number of important contributions to political discussion research. First, it further explains the problems associated with envisaging Facebook as a potential site for meaningful democratic discussion. Findings suggest that Facebook does provide an outlet for political discussion to individuals fascinated with politics, though individuals do not approach these conversations to accomplish persuasive goals. Second, this study highlights the importance of drawing from interpersonal communication research in the area of political discussion. As demonstrated by the findings from the GPA model and the PIC index, interpersonal theories offer unique explanations for how and why political discussion occurs. Political communication scholars interested in examining the effects of political discussion would therefore do well to consider the interpersonal principles that inform the behaviors on which their research centers. Finally, this study's findings call into question scholarly attempts to resolve the debates about the definition and the effects of political disagreement. Instead, political communication scholars should adopt a more nuanced understanding of political discussion and accept that political



disagreement encompasses many things that vary with contexts, research questions, and individuals.

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**Table 1***Factor Loadings for Final 4-Factor Solution of Secondary Goals*

|  | 1          | 2          | 3          | 4          |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Facebook friends might embarrass me if I try too hard to get them to consider my political views.                          | <b>.73</b> | .08        | .26        | .06        |
| I am worried that posting my political views on Facebook would make me uncomfortable or nervous.                           | <b>.67</b> | .18        | .12        | .20        |
| I am worried about getting my feelings hurt if I express my political views on Facebook.                                   | <b>.65</b> | -.01       | .38        | .02        |
| I don't want to look stupid while trying to persuade Facebook friends about political issues.                              | <b>.62</b> | .28        | -.11       | -.12       |
| Facebook friends might insult or attack me if I keep bothering them with my political views.                               | <b>.61</b> | .23        | .06        | -.03       |
| When politics comes up in Facebook conversations, I avoid saying things which might make me uncomfortable or nervous.      | <b>.60</b> | .27        | -.16       | .23        |
| I am very conscious of what is appropriate and inappropriate when politics comes up in Facebook conversations.             | .16        | <b>.67</b> | -.18       | .14        |
| I am not willing to risk possible damage to relationships in order to get Facebook friends to consider my political views. | -.02       | <b>.67</b> | -.10       | .12        |
| When politics comes up in Facebook conversations, I am careful to avoid posting things which are socially inappropriate.   | .30        | <b>.62</b> | -.23       | .07        |
| I am concerned with putting myself in a "bad light" when I think about posting on Facebook about politics.                 | .29        | <b>.60</b> | .11        | .14        |
| It is very important to me to convince Facebook friends to consider my political views.                                    | .09        | -.09       | <b>.77</b> | -.28       |
| I am very concerned about getting my political views considered when I am on Facebook.                                     | .10        | .04        | <b>.77</b> | -.13       |
| Getting Facebook friends to consider my political views is more important to me than preserving relationships.             | -.10       | .26        | <b>.71</b> | .16        |
| I believe that my political views don't belong on Facebook.  | .08        | .07        | -.17       | <b>.86</b> |
| I believe that I should keep my political views to myself when I'm on Facebook.  | .09        | .16        | -.14       | <b>.84</b> |
| Facebook is not an appropriate place for me to persuade people about politics.   | .07        | .16        | -.27       | <b>.76</b> |
| Eigenvalue   | 4.84       | 3.56       | 1.60       | 1.30       |
| Variance Explained (%)   | 23.04      | 17.00      | 7.64       | 6.17       |

**Table 2***Descriptive and Reliability Statistics of Study Variables (N = 432)*

|                                | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | Cronbach's $\alpha$ |
|--------------------------------|----------|-----------|---------------------|
| GPA variables                  |          |           |                     |
| Influence goal                 | 1.98     | .78       | .759                |
| Identity goal                  | 3.65     | .90       | .836                |
| Interaction goal               | 3.50     | .76       | .707                |
| Affect management goal         | 2.95     | .71       | .779                |
| PIC variables                  |          |           |                     |
| Cognitive Engagement           | 3.11     | .78       | .892                |
| Perceived Relevance            | 3.69     | .69       | .705                |
| Perceived Knowledge            | 3.99     | .73       | .714                |
| Facebook participation         | 7.71     | 7.00      | .892                |
| Disagreement                   | 3.87     | .85       | .841                |
| Avoidance                      | 5.49     | 1.52      | .955                |
| Tolerance for disagreement     | 3.06     | .56       | .852                |
| Political information efficacy | 2.96     | .87       | .857                |
| Political extremism            | 38.49    | 28.12     |                     |

**Table 3***Regression Models of GPA and PIC Predicting Facebook Political Participation (N = 432)*

|                       | Model 1  |             |         | Model 2  |             |         |
|-----------------------|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|
|                       | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ |
| Controls              |          |             |         |          |             |         |
| Age                   | .60      | .22         | .12***  | .56      | .20         | .12**   |
| Sex (high: female)    | -.87     | .65         | -.06    | -.17     | .59         | -.01    |
| Socio-economic status | .22      | .40         | .03     | .10      | .36         | .01     |
| Facebook time         | .03      | .01         | .17**   | .03      | .01         | .18***  |
| Facebook friends      | .00      | .00         | .04     | .00      | .00         | .03     |
| Democrat              | 2.16     | .77         | .15***  | 1.94     | .69         | .13**   |
| Republican            | .95      | .82         | .06     | 1.07     | .73         | .07     |
| PIC variables         |          |             |         |          |             |         |
| Cognitive engagement  |          |             |         | 3.89     | .42         | .44***  |
| Perceived knowledge   |          |             |         | -.57     | .41         | -.06    |
| Perceived relevance   |          |             |         | 1.54     | .49         | .15**   |
| Secondary goals       |          |             |         |          |             |         |
| Influence             | .42      | .87         | .05     |          |             |         |
| Identity              | -2.54    | .39         | -.33*** |          |             |         |
| Interaction           | 2.38     | .48         | .26***  |          |             |         |
| Affect management     | -.60     | .52         | -.06    |          |             |         |
| R <sup>2</sup> change |          | .121***     |         |          | .254***     |         |
| Total R <sup>2</sup>  |          | .216***     |         |          | .349***     |         |

\*p &lt; .050 \*\*p &lt; .010 \*\*\*p &lt; .001.



**Table 4***Regression Coefficients for GPA and PIC Variables in a Combined Analysis (N = 432)*

|                       | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ |
|-----------------------|----------|-------------|---------|
| Controls              |          |             |         |
| Age                   | .45      | .20         | .09*    |
| Sex (high: female)    | -.27     | .58         | -.02    |
| Socio-economic status | .22      | .36         | .02     |
| Facebook time         | .03      | .01         | .19***  |
| Facebook friends      | .00      | .00         | .04     |
| Democrat              | 1.55     | .68         | .11*    |
| Republican            | .66      | .72         | .04     |
| GPA variables         |          |             |         |
| Influence             | .22      | .44         | .02     |
| Identity              | -1.81    | .36         | -.23*** |
| Interaction           | .75      | .45         | .08     |
| Affect management     | .16      | .46         | .02     |
| PIC variables         |          |             |         |
| Cognitive engagement  | 3.20     | .44         | .46***  |
| Perceived relevance   | 1.67     | .49         | .16**   |
| Perceived knowledge   | -.02     | .43         | .00     |
| R <sup>2</sup> change |          | .299***     |         |
| Total R <sup>2</sup>  |          | .394***     |         |

\*p &lt; .050 \*\*p &lt; .010 \*\*\*p &lt; .001.

**Table 5***Regression Models Predicting Secondary Goals (N = 432)*

|                       | Influence | Identity | Interaction | Affect Management |
|-----------------------|-----------|----------|-------------|-------------------|
| Control variables     |           |          |             |                   |
| Age                   | .07       | -.11*    | -.04        | -.09              |
| Sex (high: female)    | -.03      | .00      | .07         | .16**             |
| Socio-economic status | -.06      | .07      | .04         | .01               |
| Facebook time         | .00       | .05      | .06         | .04               |
| Facebook friends      | .04       | .02      | -.06        | -.08              |
| Democrat              | .14**     | -.07     | .06         | .10               |
| Republican            | .18**     | -.06     | .09         | .18**             |
| PIC variables         |           |          |             |                   |
| Cognitive engagement  | .31***    | -.27***  | .07         | -.03              |
| Perceived knowledge   | -.23***   | .33***   | .29***      | .17**             |
| Perceived relevance   | -.30***   | .06      | .13*        | -.06              |
| R <sup>2</sup> change | .150***   | .144***  | .142***     | .026**            |
| Total R <sup>2</sup>  | .206***   | .177***  | .163***     | .090***           |

*Note.* Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients.

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .010 \*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 6***Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (N = 432)*

|                       | Avoidance    | Political Participation |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| Age                   | -.07(.05)    | .60(.19)**              |
| Sex (high: female)    | .30(.15)*    | -.25(.56)               |
| Socio-economic status | -.05(.09)    | .06(.35)                |
| Facebook time         | .00(.00)     | .03(.01)***             |
| Facebook friends      | .00(.00)     | .00(.00)                |
| Democrat              | -.32(.18)    | 1.69(.68)*              |
| Republican            | -.08(.19)    | 1.24(.72)               |
| Political interest    | -.34(.07)*** | 2.00(.27)***            |
| Disagreement          | .24(.08)**   | 1.18(.32)***            |
| Avoidance             |              | -1.74(.19)***           |
| Total R <sup>2</sup>  | .110***      | .380***                 |

*Note.* Standard errors in parentheses.

\*p < .05 \*\*p < .010 \*\*\*p < .001.

**Table 7***Direct and Indirect Effects at Values of Tolerance for Disagreement (N = 432)*

|                 | Direct effects |                     | Indirect effects |                     |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
|                 | Estimate       | Confidence interval | Estimate         | Confidence interval |
| Low (2.50)      | 1.26(.48)      | .31 to 2.22         | -.29(.21)        | -.72 to .10         |
| Moderate (3.06) | 1.16(.33)      | .50 to 1.82         | -.46(.16)        | -.82 to -.17        |
| High (3.62)     | 1.05(.39)      | .28 to 1.82         | -.64(.21)        | -1.11 to -.26       |

*Notes:* Effect estimates are unstandardized; Standard errors in parentheses.

**Table 8***Direct and Indirect Effects at Values of Political Information Efficacy (N = 432)*

|                 | Direct effects |                     | Indirect effects |                     |
|-----------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
|                 | Estimate       | Confidence interval | Estimate         | Confidence interval |
| Low (2.09)      | 1.35(.49)      | .40 to 2.32         | -.57(.28)        | -1.28 to -.18       |
| Moderate (2.96) | 1.12(.32)      | .49 to 1.75         | -.46(.17)        | -.82 to -.14        |
| High (3.83)     | .88(.38)       | .14 to 1.62         | -.26(.20)        | -.67 to .11         |

*Notes:* Effect estimates are unstandardized; Standard errors in parentheses.

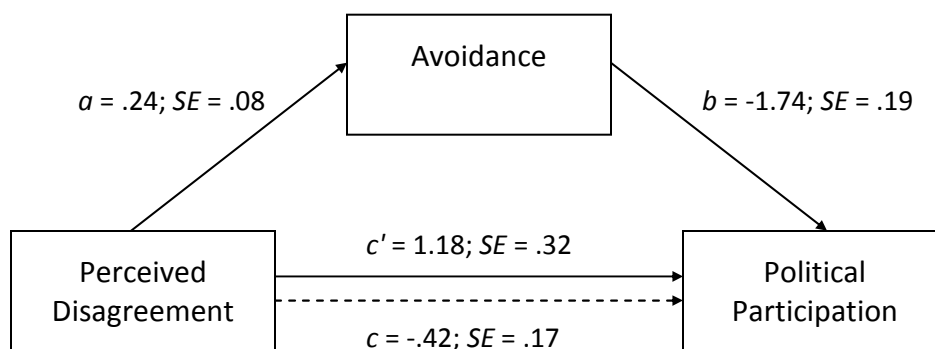
**Table 9***Direct and Indirect Effects at Values of Political Extremism (N = 432)*

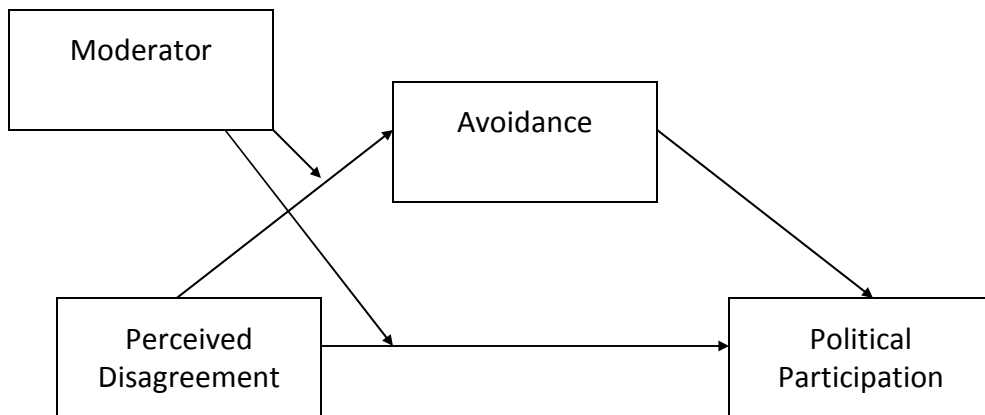
|                  | Direct effects |                     | Indirect effects |                     |
|------------------|----------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
|                  | Estimate       | Confidence interval | Estimate         | Confidence interval |
| Low (10.36)      | 1.73(.46)      | .83 to 2.63         | -.66(.24)        | -1.21 to -.25       |
| Moderate (38.49) | 1.32(.32)      | .70 to 1.95         | -.41(.16)        | -.76 to -.12        |
| High (66.61)     | .91(.40)       | .13 to 1.70         | -.17(.22)        | -.60 to .27         |

*Notes:* Effect estimates are unstandardized; Standard errors in parentheses.

**Figure 1**

*Direct and Indirect Effects of Perceived Disagreement.*



**Figure 2***PROCESS Model Number 8*

*Note:* Hypothesized conditional process model; moderator variables include tolerance for disagreement, political information efficacy, and political extremism.



## Appendix A: HSCL Approval



### APPROVAL OF PROTOCOL

September 18, 2013

Michael Kearney  
mkearney@ku.edu

Dear Michael Kearney:

On 9/18/2013, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Type of Review: | Initial Study   |
| Title of Study: | Political Discussion on Facebook: An Analysis of Interpersonal Influence Goals and Disagreement in Facebook Political Participation |
| Investigator:   | Michael Kearney   |
| IRB ID:         | STUDY00000277   |
| Funding:        | None  |
| Grant ID:       | None  |

The IRB approved the study on 9/18/2013.

1. Any significant change to the protocol requires a modification approval prior to altering the project.
2. Notify HSCL about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at [https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human\\_subjects\\_compliance\\_training](https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human_subjects_compliance_training).
3. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported immediately.
4. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

Please note university data security and handling requirements for your project:  
<https://documents.ku.edu/policies/IT/DataClassificationHandlingProceduresGuide.html>

You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the "Documents" tab in eCompliance.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Dyson Elms, MPA  
IRB Administrator, KU Lawrence Campus

Human Subjects Committee Lawrence  
Youngberg Hall | 2385 Irving Hill Road | Lawrence, KS 66045 | (785) 864-7429 | HSCL@ku.edu |  
research.ku.edu

## Appendix B: Information Statement

### Information Statement

The Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

We are conducting this study to better understand political communication on Facebook. This will entail your completion of a survey. Your participation is expected to take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The content of the survey should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life.

Although participation may not benefit you directly, we believe that the information obtained from this study will help us gain a better understanding of political discussion and engagement. Your participation is solicited, although strictly voluntary. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission. It is possible, however, with internet communications, that through intent or accident someone other than the intended recipient may see your response.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is completed, please feel free to contact us by phone or mail.

Completion of the survey indicates your willingness to take part in this study and that you are at least 18 years old. If you have any additional questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call (785) 864-7429 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7563, email [irb@ku.edu](mailto:irb@ku.edu).

Sincerely,

Michael W. Kearney  
Principal Investigator  
Department of Communication Studies  
Bailey Hall  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, KS 66045  
(785) 864-9893  
[mkearney@ku.edu](mailto:mkearney@ku.edu)

Mary C. Banwart, Ph.D.  
Faculty Supervisor  
Department of Communication Studies  
Bailey Hall  
University of Kansas  
Lawrence, KS 66045  
(785) 864-5681  
[mbanwart@ku.edu](mailto:mbanwart@ku.edu)

## **Appendix C: Demographics & Background**

### **Demographics**

1. What is your age?
2. What is your sex?
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. Of which socio-economic class do you consider yourself a member?
5. Highest level of education to date:

### **Facebook Use**

6. Do you have a Facebook account?
7. On average, approximately how many minutes per day do you spend on Facebook?
8. Approximately how many friends do you have on Facebook?

### **Background Political Information**

9. In politics, as of today, how would you best describe your political affiliation?
10. How interested would you say you are in politics?
11. How much do you tend to like or dislike each of the following groups? Please indicate your feeling on a scale from 0-100 where 0 means you very much dislike the group and 100 means you very much like the group.
  - A. Democrats
  - B. Republicans

## Appendix D: Tolerance for Disagreement Scale

*Revised Tolerance for Disagreement Scale* (Teven et al., 1998) (1-5 scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree)

1. It is more fun to be involved in a discussion where there is a lot of disagreement.
2. I enjoy talking to people with points of view different than mine.
3. I don't like to be in situations where people are in disagreement.\*
4. I prefer being in groups where everyone's beliefs are the same as mine.\*
5. Disagreements are generally helpful.
6. I prefer to change the topic of discussion when disagreement occurs.\*
7. I tend to create disagreements in conversations because it serves a useful purpose.
8. I enjoy arguing with other people about things on which we disagree.
9. I would prefer to work independently rather than to work with other people and have disagreements.\*
10. I would prefer joining a group where no disagreements occur.\*
11. I don't like to disagree with other people.\*
12. Given a choice, I would leave a conversation rather than continue a disagreement.\*
13. I avoid talking with people who I think will disagree with me.\*
14. I enjoy disagreeing with others.
15. Disagreement stimulates a conversation and causes me to communicate more.

\*recoded

### **Appendix E: Political Information Efficacy Scale**

*Political Information Efficacy Scale* (Kaid et al., 2007) (1-5 scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree)

1. I consider myself well qualified to participate in politics.
2. I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people.
3. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country.
4. If a friend asked me about the presidential election, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for.

## Appendix F: Political Interpersonal Communication Index

*Political Interpersonal Communication Index* (Banwart, 2007b) (1-5 scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree)

### Cognitive Engagement Subscale

1. I stay up to date on current political topics and issues.
2. I have developed opinions on political issues and topics.
3. I am comfortable starting a discussion about political issues with my friends.
4. I know enough information about politics and political issues to talk about them with people I don't know very well.
5. I enjoy talking about political issues and topics with others who don't think like me.
6. I have a good understanding about politics and political issues.
7. I am interested in politics and political issues.
8. I am likely to take an equal share in the conversation when discussing politics and political issues.

### Perceived Relevance Subscale

9. I do not understand how politics and political issues relate to me.\*
10. Politics and political issues are just about conflict and disagreement.\*
11. Politics and political issues have a direct influence in my life.
12. Politics and political issues just don't impact me.\*

### Perceived Knowledge Subscale

13. Before participating in a conversation about politics I should be knowledgeable about the issue.
14. I would not discuss political affairs with someone unless I knew something about the issue.
15. It is important that I obtain news about a political topic from several sources before I will talk about it with others.

\*Recoded

## Appendix G: Secondary Goals and Effort Scales

*Secondary Goals Scale* (Dillard et al., 1989) and Effort Scale (1-5 scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree)

### Influence Goal Subscale

1. It is very important to me to convince Facebook friends to consider my political views.
2. I am very concerned about getting my political views considered when I am on Facebook.
3. I really don't care that much whether Facebook friends consider my political views.\*
4. Although I want Facebook friends to consider my political views, it really isn't that important an issue.\*

### Identity Goal Subscale

5. I believe that my political views don't belong on Facebook.
6. I believe that I should keep my political views to myself when I'm on Facebook.
7. Facebook is not an appropriate place for me to persuade people about politics.

### Interaction Goal Subscale

8. When I think about posting on Facebook about politics, I am concerned with making (or maintaining) a good impression.
9. When politics comes up in Facebook conversations, I am careful to avoid posting things which are socially inappropriate.
10. I am very conscious of what is appropriate and inappropriate when politics comes up in Facebook conversations.
11. I am concerned with putting myself in a "bad light" when I think about posting on Facebook about politics.
12. I don't want to look stupid while trying to persuade Facebook friends about political issues.

### Relational Resource Goal Subscale

13. I am not willing to risk possible damage to relationships in order to get Facebook friends to consider my political views.
14. Getting Facebook friends to consider my political views is more important to me than preserving relationships.\*
15. I don't really care if posting my political views would make my Facebook friends mad or not.\*

### Personal Resource Goal Subscale

16. Facebook friends might insult or attack me if I keep bothering them with my political views.
17. Facebook friends might embarrass me if I try too hard to get them to consider my political views.
18. I am worried about getting my feelings hurt if I express my political views on Facebook.

### Affect Management Goal Subscale

19. When politics comes up in Facebook conversations, I avoid saying things which might make me uncomfortable or nervous.
20. Discussing politics on Facebook does not seem to be the type of situation to make me uncomfortable or nervous.\*
21. I am worried that posting my political views on Facebook would make me uncomfortable or nervous.

### Effort

22. I put a lot of thought into figuring out the best way to get some Facebook friends to consider my political views.
23. I try everything I can think of to get some Facebook friends to consider my political views.
24. I put a great deal of effort into getting some Facebook friends to consider my political views.

\*recoded

## **Appendix H: Facebook Political Participation Index**

Please indicate how often you have done each of the following activities on Facebook in the past 6 months: (0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = a few times, and 3 = often)

1. “Like” a friend’s status, comment, or link about politics
2. Post a status or comment about politics
3. Share a link about politics
4. Reply to a status, link, or comment about politics
5. Post an image relating to politics
6. Comment on an image relating to politics
7. Join or leave a group or page about politics
8. RSVP for an event about politics
9. Follow or like a political group or candidate
10. Message or chat a friend about politics
11. Add or delete political information from my profile
12. Post or reply to a note about politics
13. Use a hashtag about politics



### **Appendix I: Disagreement Scale**

1. When it comes to political issues, do you tend to have the same or different opinions as your Facebook friends?
2. When it comes to political figures, do you tend to have the same or different opinions as your Facebook friends?
3. During last year's election, did you tend to have the same or different opinions as your Facebook friends when it came to presidential candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney?

**Appendix J: Avoidance Scale**

1. I try to avoid discussing political issues on Facebook.
2. I try to avoid posting on threads where Facebook friends are discussing political issues.
3. I try to avoid discussing political figures on Facebook.
4. I try to avoid posting on threads where Facebook friends are discussing political figures.